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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of individual differences in categorizing or domain placing social situations as entailing or not entailing moral harm in accounting for occurrences of everyday moral incidents. It was hypothesized that (1) much of what is experienced as morally injurious in everyday social events between significant others stems from the human tendency to interpret social cues from one's own vantage point and, given that the meaning attributed to a given social situation is contingent on the role of the interpreter; and (2) an act which is judged to be morally harmful, unfair, or wrong in one context may not appear so in another. In order to test these hypotheses, third and sixth graders were interviewed about everyday moral incidents in which they viewed themselves as having morally injured a friend, parent, sibling, and teacher (perpetrator accounts). They also were asked about incidents in which they viewed themselves as having been morally injured by a friend, parent, sibling, and teacher (victim accounts). As expected, the majority of both perpetrator and victim accounts indicated that the harm experienced by the victim was not judged to be intended by the perpetrator. The attribution of harm varied, however, depending on whether the moral incident was recounted from the perpetrator or victim perspective and the other's specific relation to the subject. Also as expected, many of the subject's perpetrator accounts revealed that subjects unwittingly engaged in acts which they judged as morally unfair in their victim accounts. The educational and theoretical implications of these findings were discussed. (Author)

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# *THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE CATEGORIZATION (OR DOMAIN PLACEMENT) OF SOCIAL CUES IN OCCURRENCES OF EVERYDAY MORAL CONFLICTS*

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# ABSTRACT

**This study examined the role of individual differences in categorizing (or domain placing) social situations as entailing or not entailing moral harm in accounting for occurrences of everyday moral incidents. It was hypothesized that (1) much of what is experienced as morally injurious in everyday social events between significant others stems from the human tendency to interpret social cues from one's own vantage point and, given that the meaning attributed to a given social situation is contingent on the role of the interpreter, (2) an act which is judged to be morally harmful, unfair, or wrong in one context may not appear so in another. In order to test these hypotheses, third and sixth graders were interviewed about everyday moral incidents in which they viewed themselves as having morally injured a friend, parent, sibling, and teacher (perpetrator accounts). They were also asked about incidents in which they viewed themselves as having been morally injured by a friend, parent, sibling, and teacher (victim accounts). As expected, the majority of both perpetrator and victim accounts indicated that the harm experienced by the victim was not judged to be intended by the perpetrator. The attribution of harm varied, however, depending on whether the moral incident was recounted from the perpetrator or victim perspective and the other's specific relation to the subject. Also as expected, many of the subjects' perpetrator accounts revealed that subjects unwittingly engaged in acts which they judged as morally unfair in their victim accounts. The educational and theoretical implications of these findings were discussed.**

# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to examine a relatively neglected and potentially significant source of variation in individuals' moral meaning making across contexts. Specifically, this study examined the role of individual differences in categorizing (or domain placing) social situations as entailing or not entailing moral harm in occurrences of everyday moral incidents. This study was guided by philosophical frameworks which posit that the main obstacle facing the task of moral regulation is to overcome the human tendency to give privileged status to one's own way of judging the world (Butler, 1846; Gadamer, 1976; Mill, 1975; Taylor, 1985a, 1985b; Rorty, 1989, 1991; Zwiebach, 1988). The common theme underlying these diverse philosophical frameworks is that given the heterogeneity in individuals' beliefs and factual assumptions about the world, experiences, and goals, there exists tremendous variations in individuals' interpretations of even common social situations (e.g., as morally acceptable or unacceptable). Based on this line of reasoning, I expected that a significant portion of what is experienced as morally injurious in real life stems from variations in reading the meaning of the social situation at hand and individuals' tendency to give privileged status to their own way of judging the world at the exclusion of others' perspectives.

In order to assess the viability of this thesis, the present study interviewed third and sixth graders about real life social events in which they viewed themselves as having morally injured (perpetrator accounts) and having been morally injured by (victim accounts) significant others (friends, parents, siblings, and

teachers). By securing subjects' interpretations of whether they judged the moral incident as stemming from inadvertency or from deliberate acts of harm over a wide variety of relationships (for a total of eight moral incidents per subject), the present methodology was able to test the extent to which children's moral incidents stemmed from their inattentiveness to take into account the negative moral implications of their actions on others' welfare over a large sample of moral incidents. I hypothesized that because everyday social situations are multifaceted (i.e., different individuals can read the meaning of a given situation differently), a situation which appears morally benign from one perspective may appear morally injurious from another. Consequently, a significant portion of what is experienced as morally injurious in real life amongst significant others stems from individuals' failure to take into account the negative moral implications of their actions on others' welfare. In addition, if the moral meaning of a given social situation varies as a function of one's role in a given situation, then acts which appear morally benign from one perspective may appear morally injurious from another. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that a significant number of the subjects' perpetrator accounts would reveal that subjects unwittingly engaged in acts which they judged as morally unfair or wrong in their victim accounts. By addressing these issues, the present study attempted to extend our understanding of the extent to which variations in moral meaning across contexts are a function of individual differences in framing a given social situation as entailing or not entailing moral harm or wrongdoing.

# METHOD

**SUBJECTS.** The study included 40 subjects, 10 male and 10 female third-graders and sixth-graders recruited from an ethnically diverse middle-class suburban public school in a major metropolitan area.

**PROCEDURE.** Subjects were interviewed about everyday moral incidents in which they viewed themselves as having morally injured a friend, parent, sibling, and teacher (perpetrator accounts). They were also asked about incidents in which they viewed themselves as having been morally injured by a friend, parent, sibling, and teacher (victim accounts). For each conflict issue, subjects were asked to explain how the conflict got started, why they viewed the conflict as morally harmful or wrong, and whether and why they believed that the conflict incident stemmed form inadvertency or from the perpetrator's purposeful intent to do harm. In all, each subject furnished eight moral incidents, four of which involved events in which they viewed themselves as having been victimized and four others in which they viewed themselves as having victimized others.

**DEFINITIONS.** *Deliberate harm*: The harmful consequences were anticipated or intended by the perpetrator. *Inadvertent harm*: The moral injury experienced by the victim was not anticipated or intended by the perpetrator. *Moral incidents*: Social events involving perceptions of being treated disrespectfully, unfairly, or wrongly.

**CODING SYSTEMS. Three aspects of the subjects' interviews were coded: (1) deliberate versus inadvertent judgments; (2) subjects' descriptions of the perpetrators' motives for engaging in the injurious act; and (3) the types of issues involved in the moral incident. Coding schemes for subjects' descriptions of the perpetrators' motives and moral incident issues were developed based on pilot data.**

**I. ATTRIBUTION OF THE PERPETRATORS' MOTIVES. Subjects' judgments of the perpetrators' motives for engaging in the morally transgressive acts was coded using the following categories listed in Table I. By definition, all non-moral and moral/other-regarding attributions entailed judgments of inadvertency. Conversely, moral/unilateral harm, moral/retaliatory harm, and moral/punishment scores entailed deliberate judgments.**

**II. MORAL INCIDENT ISSUES. In order to formulate a coding scheme for categorizing the types of issues involved in children's moral incidents, subjects' responses to all moral incident conditions (eight incidents per each of the 40 subjects) were grouped into consistent categories to form the following 11 categories in Table II. Next, in order to assess the degree to which subjects unwittingly engaged in acts which they characterized as morally wrong in other contexts, subjects' moral incident accounts told from the perspective of the victim were compared with perpetrator incident issues between the perpetrator and victim accounts.**

## TABLE I

## SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF JUSTIFICATION CATEGORIES

| Categories | Description |
|---|---|
| **INADVERTENT** | |
| NON-MORAL | Evaluations indicating that the perpetrator of the moral transgression did not anticipate or was not aware of the negative consequences of her/his actions |
| MORAL/OTHER REGARDING | Statements indicating that the alleged victim's perception of being morally injured by the perpetrator was associated with the perpetrator's attempt to help out another |
| **DELIBERATE** | |
| MORAL/UNILATERAL HARM | Statements indicating that the moral injury was the result of the perpetrator's willful and unprovoked act of harm against the victim |
| MORAL/RETALIATORY HARM | Evaluations indicating that the perpetrator's actions were to avenge a previous moral injury or wrong |
| MORAL/PUNISHMENT | Statements indicating that the perception of moral injury stemmed from an authority figure's attempt to carry out a household or school regulation |

*TABLE II*

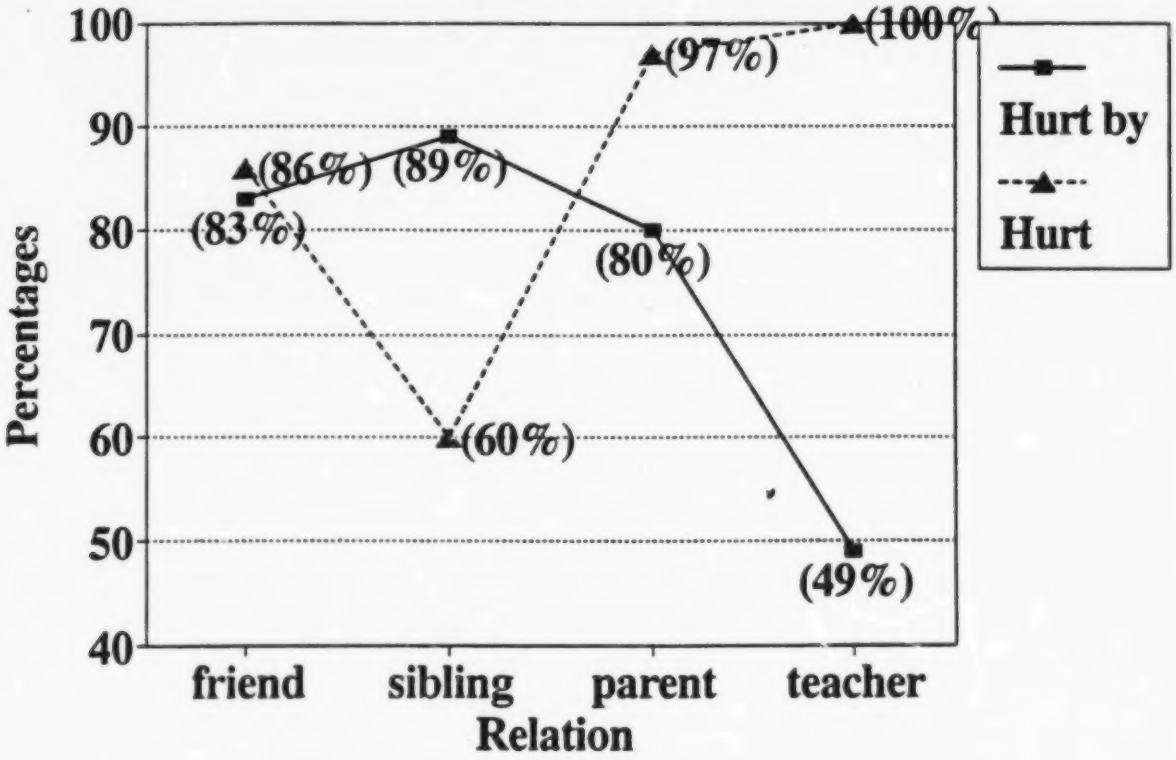
*MORAL INCIDENT CATEGORIES*

| Categories | Prototypical Examples |
|---|---|
| **1) FAILURE TO FULFILL COMMITMENT** | **...Violation of trust/Breaks promise**<br>**...Failure to fulfill duty or to reciprocate favors** |
| **2) FORCED TO DO UNDESIRABLE THINGS** | **...Lack of choice in whether to participate in school activity**<br>**...Lack of freedom to converse with friends** |
| **3) INSUBORDINATION** | **...Breaking classroom rules (e.g., talking in class)**<br>**...Talking back to the teacher/Attempting to explain oneself** |
| **4) UNFAIR DISTRIBUTION OF PUNISHMENT** | **...Excessive punishment for misdeed**<br>**...Unfair distribution of responsibilities** |
| **5) NAME CALLING/TEASING** | **...Subject/Other makes fun of another/subject**<br>**...Subject/Other insults another/subject** |
| **6) INFRINGING ON ANOTHER'S PROPERTY** | **...Taking others' property without securing permission**<br>**...Playing with others' property without permission** |
| **7) LACK OF INTEREST IN THE SUBJECT/OTHER** | **...Subject/Other feels neglected by another/subject**<br>**...Subject/Other feels rejected by another/subject** |
| **8) MINGLING IN PERSONAL BUSINESS** | **...Invasion of privacy**<br>**...Unwanted regulation over personal appearance** |
| **9) INSUBSTANTIATED ACCUSATIONS** | **...Falsely accusing another/being accused of wrongdoing**<br>**...Telling lies about another/Having lies told about oneself** |
| **10) UNFAIR PLAY/CHEATING IN A GAME** | **...Breaking game rules**<br>**...Changing game rules** |
| **11) UNFAIR DISTRIBUTION OF GOODS** | **...Unfair distribution of money**<br>**...Unfair distribution of control over television viewing** |

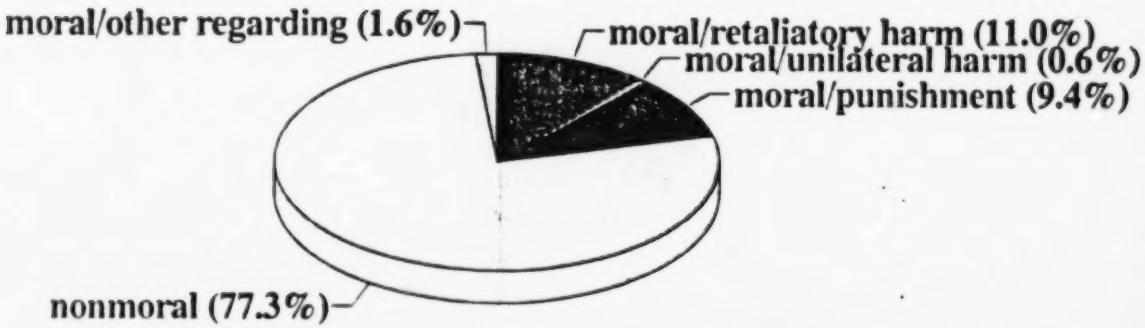
# RESULTS

The majority of both the perpetrator and victim accounts indicated that the harm experienced by the victim was not judged to be intended by the perpetrator (almost 80%, when averaged across all conditions; binomial, $Z = .001$). A 2 (gender) X 2 (grade) X 2 (perspective) X 4 (relation) Analysis of Variance with repeated measures on perspective and relation on arc-sine transformed proportions of subjects' deliberate versus inadvertent judgments revealed a significant main effect for perspective, $F(1,31) = 5.39$, $p < .05$, relation, $F(3,93) = 2.76$, $p < .05$, and a significant perspective X relation interaction effect, $F(3,93) = 13.28$, $p < .001$. No significant gender or grade level differences were found. In addition, 30 out of the 40 subjects' perpetrator accounts revealed that subjects unwittingly engaged in acts for which they had condemned others in their victim accounts (binomial, $Z = .005$). A 2 (gender) X 2 (grade) Analysis of Variance on arc-sine transformed proportions of subjects engaging in acts which they characterized as morally wrong in other contexts revealed a significant gender X grade interaction effect, $F(1,36) = 5.23$, $p < .05$). No significant gender or grade level differences were found. Tukey post-hoc tests (HSD) revealed that sixth grade males were significantly more likely to engage in acts which they had characterized as morally wrong than were third grade males ($Q > 3.8$).

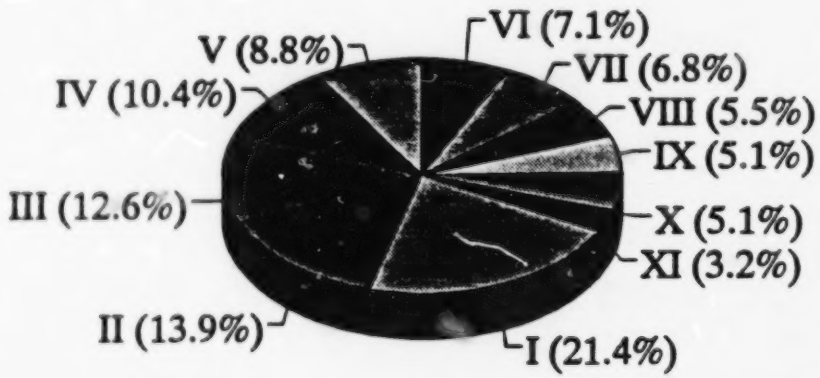
## Percentages of subjects indicating that the moral conflict was inadvertent



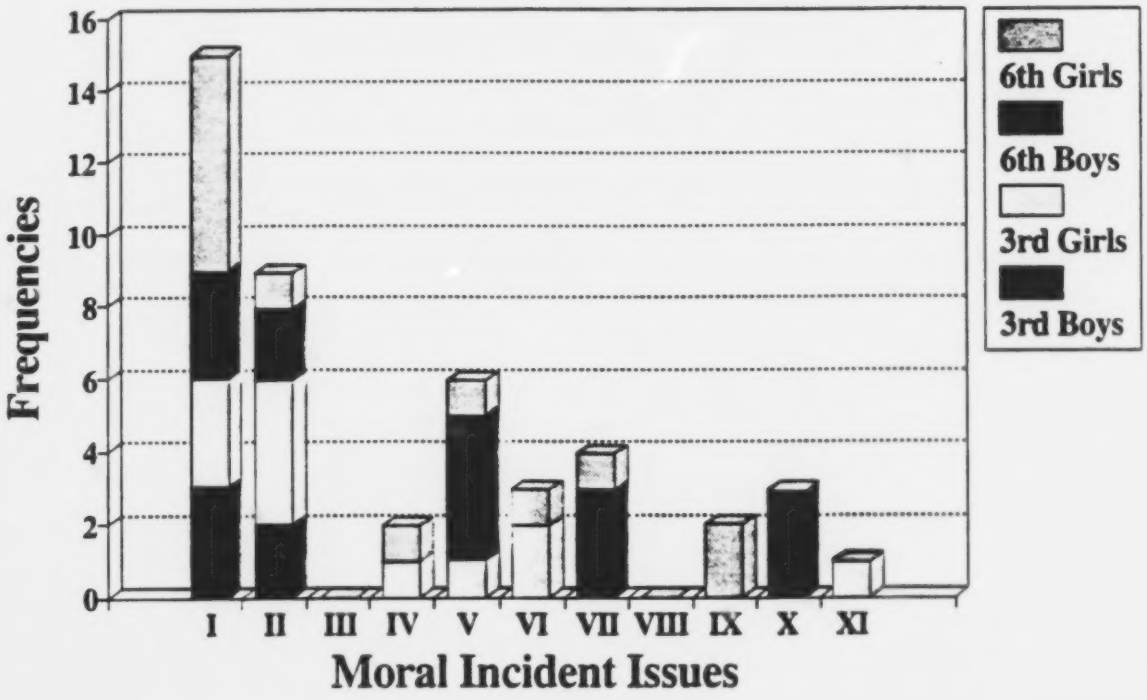

## Subjects' evaluations of perpetrators' motives for engaging in harmful acts



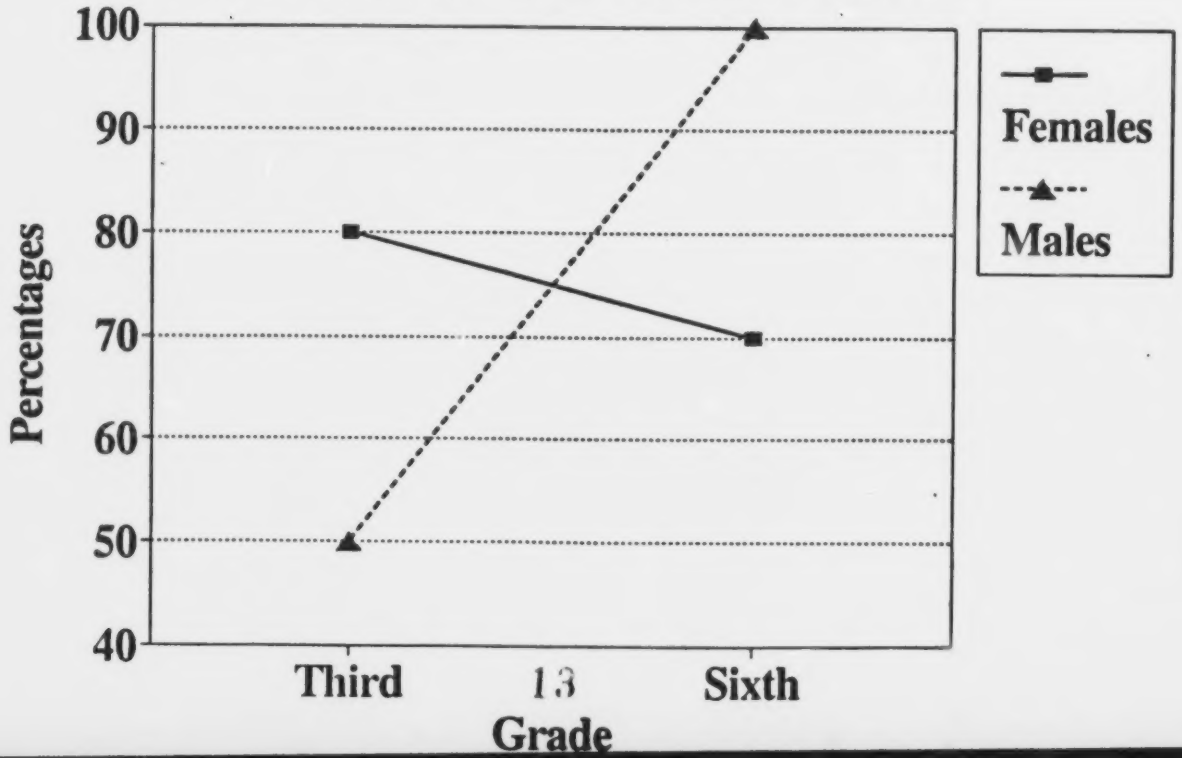
**The distribution of moral incident issues (in %) across all conditions**



## The number of subjects engaging in acts for which they had criticized others




## % of subjects engaging in acts for which they had criticized others



# DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with the thesis that the meaning attributed to a given social situation is contingent on the role of the interpreter and that much of what is experienced by children as morally injurious in everyday social events with their significant others stems from variations in defining the meaning of the social situation at hand (e.g., as moral versus nonmoral). First, the prevalence of moral incidents involving inadvertency suggests that individuals tend to focus on different aspects of social situations. For instance, many of the children indicated that their teacher interpreted their attempts to justify their actions when accused of misconduct as 'talking back' or failing to respect the teacher's authority (i.e., insubordination). The discrepant reading of social cues between the alleged perpetrator and victim of a moral transgression suggests that the expression and interpretation of which actions convey notions of care and respect (or conversely, a lack of concern and disrespect) in context differ even amongst those who interact regularly with each other. Moreover, the fact that many of the children's perpetrator accounts revealed that children unwittingly engaged in acts which they judged as unfair in their victim accounts further supports this study's thesis that moral meaning is contingent on the role of the interpreter.

One implication of these findings is that despite the reported developmental advances made during the pre-adolescent and adolescent years on hypothetical moral problem solving tasks which require coordination of consequences, intentions, and different perspectives, subjects nevertheless construed everyday social cues from their own vantage point and this differential focus on the moral implications of their own and others' actions played an integral role in perceptions of being morally injured. This suggests that attempts at moral education or sensitivity training should focus not only on whether individuals are able to take the perspective of another, but also highlight the apparent human tendency towards self-bias in their moral evaluations. Perhaps by highlighting both that a given situation which appears morally benign from one perspective may appear morally injurious from another and that many individuals engage in like-acts which they judge to be unfair when they are in other contexts, we can facilitate individuals' reflective awareness of the contingencies and limitations of their own moral meaning making. Such an emphasis on the 'moral contradiction' of one's own actions and on the contingency and limitations of one's own moral judgments may facilitate the creation of a community of more tolerant and understanding individuals.

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